Nature stories for young readers

The Mud Connection

VIDYA AND RAJARAM SHARMA

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The story is based on observations made at an institutional campus in South Delhi during the years 2010 to 2013.
The mud nest in the story was built in Septemper 2012.

Photographs in this book may not show the actual size of birds or their nests.

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I walked as quickly as I could.

Nothing. Nothing at all except wet dust! No worms. No insects. Nothing!

What were they doing here then? “Eating mud? ... really ... is it possible?" I wondered aloud, surprised and puzzled.

"Anything is possible but not probable," replied Myna rather calmly.

I had not expected a reply.

While I was entering the playground, I noticed two small birds picking up something from the broad steps of the viewers gallery. I wondered what that could be and had gone closer to examine.

That was when Myna startled me! And surprised me too. If you know mynas the way I do, you would expect to find

them on trees, on light poles, on wires, atop buildings, on drains, on the lawns, on roads, beside garbage bins ... almost anywhere. But nowhere; NOWHERE can you find a myna squatting on grass.

I stared at Myna in amazement. Sitting peacefully on the grass bordering the broad steps. What was she doing there?

The only other birds I had seen squatting on the ground were the Lapwings – both Redwattled and Yellow-wattled Lapwings. And that too only while incubating eggs.

Lapwings are ground nesters. Folding their long thin legs, they lower themselves on the eggs – usually four – that look more like stones than eggs.

The playground is home to a pair of Redwattled Lapwings and they choose some corner or the other to make a nest every summer. Not an elaborate nest but a few stones and sticks thrown around a very shallow scrape in the ground.

"Did the Lapwings teach you to nest on the ground?" I asked, quite desperate to know what Myna was doing there on the grass.

Redwattled Lapwing and eggs

Common Myna and nest

Myna looked ahead without responding.

"The open ground is much better than a dingy tree hole! Don't you think?"

I knew very well how and where mynas nest. This one, the Common Myna and two of her close relatives, the Brahminy Myna and Bank Myna prefer holes. In trees or even in brick walls. Another relative, the Pied Myna, however builds a very elaborate nest, out of all sorts of rubbish – grass, sticks, rags, threads and such things. Rosy Pastors, another member of the same family, don't

nest in our country. They visit us in April, on their way back to their homes in Europe where they nest and raise their chicks. It is so wonderful to watch them in the skies, flying in large formations, or listen to them chat continuously when they assemble on tall trees, or as they busily gorge on the plentiful Peepal or Chamrod fruits.

My teasing had very little effect on Myna. Though I insisted she had lost her mind trying to imitate the Lapwing, she remained unmoved. And after a while, she calmly said, "I am me and that's that! I don't need to be anybody else!"

Rosy Pastor

"Oh really!" I exclaimed. "Then why are you sitting on the grass like a Lapwing?"

"Trouble me no more," she said, softly. "Know this if you must. Lapwings have no hind toe and perching birds they are not! And I ... I have injured my feet – hind toe and all. Perch I can therefore not; nor stand or walk."

I stared at her in dismay feeling miserable for teasing her. Ashamed too. My head was spinning with questions. What would she do now? Would her foot heal? What if it doesn't? Can she be safe here? On the grass? What if –

“No, they don't. They don't eat mud.” Myna broke my chain of thought.

“Who?”

“The Martins!”

“Martins?”

“The Dusky Crag Martins. Those dull coloured birds –”

“Those small birds?” I had all but forgotten about those

birds and Myna succeeded in drawing my attention away from her. I glanced at the steps and there they were again.

“Where did they come from?” I asked, “I have not seen them here before.”

“They have been here all along. Resident birds like us. Run along ... see for yourself what they are doing.”

I was not interested in those birds anymore.

Lapwings are not perching birds, I knew that very well.

But I had not noticed that they had no hind toe. No wonder they are always on the ground or on rooftops! No wonder they nest on the ground or rooftops!

But how can Myna manage without her feet? How can she find food? What if –

“Run along,” she urged again. “Use your toes, ankles and heels!"

It was very clear. She wanted me to go away. With a sad heart, I walked away from her.

I am not sure what prompted me to look up when I got below the stands. But look I did and stopped abruptly.

I could not believe my eyes. And even before I recovered, I whispered, “Oh ... ho! Laurie Baker!”

Mr. Martin did not seem to notice me at all. He was too busy to notice anything at all. Fixed to the beam was a neat cup of small mud pellets. And perched on the rim was Mr. Martin. With a mud pellet in his beak.

He began painstakingly fixing the mud to the rim.

“Oh! Perfect ... perfect ... exactly as Laurie baker had said. A cob at a time.” Though my neck was already hurting, I continued to look at the bird and the nest. Lady Martin flew in just as Mr. Martin finished his part, gently tweeting, “chit ... chit ... chit ...”.

Both Mr. and Lady Martin look exactly alike! Small birds. Sort of longish. Dusky brown. A very small thin beak. And the tiny beak was doing all the amazing work.

“OH! Here comes the next COB!” I exclaimed, quite loudly, and continued, “How clever ... Laurie Baker –”

“Shuush!” Lady Martin said and proceeded to fix the cob.

It was not as simple as Laurie Baker had described – placing one cob on another. The bird spent some good time sticking the cob, shaking her head rapidly, but not vigorously. I watched her in awe.

“This is a job of great concentration, and you are disturbing us!” She said with some little irritation after she finished. “We are the Martins, if you must know, the Dusky Crag Martins. Stop calling us Laurie Baker,” she said and flew away not giving me a chance to tell her that

Laurie Baker was not a bird but an architect.

I had read his book. A small one with lots of pictures, He had described many ways of making mud houses. The simplest was using cobs – big balls of mud, in this case. They are arranged in rows one above the other to make walls. Best suited for making circular walls, something similar to what the Martins were doing.

Laurie Baker had laid down strict rules for mud selection and preparation. So that houses don't crack up when exposed to sun or rain. The right kind of mud and the

houses would last for a very long time!

Martins however didn't seem to care about making the cobs uniformly shaped. Nor did they seem to care much about preparing the mud.

Though I don't know if Laurie Baker would have approved Martin's mud selection, he would give them full marks for selecting a nice place for their nest. There can be no dryer place than the vertical face of a beam supporting the first floor gallery. Water could never reach there no matter how hard it rained.

Dusky Crag Martins

How clever of them! How well they knew that the worst enemy of mud houses was water. I watched the birds laboriously add one pellet after the other.

And suddenly I got an idea. A brilliant one. I could wait no more. Off I ran home eager to work on my idea. The next three days were very disappointing days. No matter how hard I tried, my brilliant idea did not work. When I returned and described my failed attempts, Lady Martin laughed heartily.

I had tried all sorts of mud, fine, with a bit of sand, some

grass mixed mud and even potter's clay. Laurie Baker's book could not help me either. The mud pellets refused to stick together and stay. The clay refused to hold shape! And when I was discovered, all I got was some sound scolding for dirtying up the wall.

“Seeing others do something is not the same as you doing it.” Lady Martin suggested and tried hard to cheer me up.

“Yes!” I agreed, a lot wiser than before, “You can make something only when you know exactly how to make it and lucky enough to find the right kind of materials.”

“Not always easy to find the right sort of mud or the right weather. Everything depends on everything!” She declared and told me that sometimes their nests remain incomplete for one reason or the other.

Mr. Martin joined in and was happy to see me.

He announced proudly, “Our nest is done! The eggs –”

“Completed?” I asked surprised.

“Oh ... yes! Just finished lining up the nest. Now –”

“What! But where are the feathers?” I asked puzzled.

“Right here inside. How can we forget the feathers? Soft and nice! We always line our nests with feathers, grass, anything soft – ”

“Not INSIDE. Look at that nest.” I pointed to another nest on a nearby beam, the space above the rim was jam packed with soft feathers.

“Oh! That ... that is not what we do.” Mr. Martin simply declared.

“What do you mean? All Martins’ nests must be alike. Yes or no? Look at that nest. Look at the mud cup. Just like yours. How lazy can you be?” I accused him, angrily.

“It WAS! Not anymore.”

That was it. Another declaration that made no sense to me. No matter how hard I tried, I got no further explanations.

It took me hours and hours of careful observation and I finally did solve the mystery.

Well, that is another story.

A story about feet again. Of how House Swifts sometimes luckily chance upon abandoned Martins' nests and use them as convenient footholds to make their feathers-only nest.

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House Swift

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